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ABSTRACT

Americans tend to regard persons without the ability to read as being less than fully functioning members of society. There are at least four ways in which educators can deal with what appears to be a prejudice in favor of literacy while also ensuring widespread literacy: by educating parents and the general public that other means to understanding the written word besides traditional literacy are acceptable and can permit an individual with severe blocks to literacy to be a fully human person, by sharing the reading responsibility with teachers of subjects other than English, by raising teacher expectations of students, and by publicizing the accomplishments of public education in the area of literacy. Specific actions that teachers can take include insisting that students read substantive material rather than completing "empty" exercises, investing in cassette tapes to record students' reading achievements for parents, and publishing student-written books. (AEA)

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READING: WHY SO IMPORTANT?

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October 1979

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I would like to share with you some reflections about human cognitive development and the task of teaching children to read, with a particular focus on four key challenges which we as educators are facing today in this country. It is clear that we are living in a time when public criticism of the public educational system is very much in vogue; in fact, the eleventh annual Gallup Poll of Education, reported last month, continues the documentation of the negative facts of public opinion on education in America. Arthur Wise, of the Rand Corporation, is one of a number of scholars who have studied the results of American education and has concluded that the news on the whole is good, not bad. He has said, "the loss of confidence (in public education) is not the result of a decline in quality; it is the result of a re-emerging conservatism which wants to see the world as worse than it used to be." How, then, do we as educators react and what is our best direction for the 1980's? Certainly a great deal of the criticism of public education is focussed on literacy. But it is fascinating to note that some recent studies have documented Wise's statement. For example, in Indiana a state-wide sampling of students matched tenth graders in

1976 with tenth graders in 1944 on a group achievement test of reading skill and found that the 1976 group equalled or outperformed the 1944 group even though the 1976 group included many of those children, both white and black, who never even reached the tenth grade in 1944.

Why is it that reading remains so dear to the hearts of Americans or in fact all Westerners, and why is there such anxiety about literacy today? If we step back for a moment and play the role of the anthropologist, we can recall that every culture in the human race defines what it is to be human with its own particular criteria. What it means to be human for a Bushman in the African Desert of the Kalahari has some elements in common with what it means to be human in the Gobi Desert and the Great Desert of the American Southwest; however, there are indeed some uniquenesses as well. Literacy and the ability to not only decode the written word of others but also encode one's own words on paper is a part of the definition of humanness for those of us who happen to live in the Western culture. The anthropologists provide us with another very useful concept, namely ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is defined as the tendency to regard members of another culture or subgroup within our own culture totally on the basis of the skills and values held by the majority in the viewer's culture. Hence, the French tend to judge the Algerians on the basis of French standards alone. And, in our culture we tend to regard members without the ability to read as being less than fully-functioning members of the group, even though

such a judgment may at heart be in error. So much for standing back and playing the role of the anthropologist; we are members of a culture that values reading; what do we do with the challenge in front of us? I submit to you that there are at least the following four ways in which we can take action to not only deal with what appears to be a prejudice in favor of literacy but also admittedly to ensure widespread literacy.

1. Educating the Public about Reading

Our first task is to educate parents and the general lay public that other means to understanding the written word beside traditional literacy are indeed acceptable and can permit an individual who has severe blocks to literacy to be a fully human person. For example, I have only heard of a few isolated instances in which a school or a college positively recognized a severe and impeding learning disability in a student by permitting him or her to utilize a tape recorder to record and play back important lectures and readings. How many people realize that as well-known a person as Nelson Rockefeller (although he had many financial advantages) had a severe reading disability for his entire life which did not prevent him from attaining high office in a highly verbal environment? There are many less fortunate Nelson Rockefellers who need to be given that chance and that full recognition, and we have to be part of the task force that makes such adaptations acceptable. It is language, not reading that makes us Human. Explore the many ways that language as a social process can be used to help the student.

Marilyn Hanf Buckley of the University of California at Berkeley in the Summer 1979 issue of the California Journal of Teacher Education points out that,

"Understanding language as a personal and social process is derived from understanding language as a symbolic process. Language is part of a larger symbolic system which is innately acquired by all human beings and which distinguishes the human from other life. Humans translate their experiences symbolically: they dance for joy or rain, they sing, compose symphonies, paint pictures, design houses, decorate jugs, weave rugs and baskets, tell tales, write essays, dramatize an event, and in short, create their culture through symbols. Of all symbolic expressions, language is the most significant, the most powerful. It enables humans to refer to things and events in the absence of the things/events; it gives form to feelings, it aids the memory; it represents most conscious thinking". (M.H. Buckley, "Toward a Reformation of Teacher Training", CJTE, Vol. VI, No. 3, 1979, p. 45-46.)

Reading must be taught as part of the language process--not as an isolated skill. So, Why is reading so important?--to make students "Fully human", but we must in our instruction recognize that reading is but one part of the symbol system we all use.

2. Share the Reading Responsibility with other Teachers

As reading specialists we secondly need to help other professional educators realize that we alone cannot manage the job of improving literacy in our secondary schools; all teachers must help by offering to share the load within the context of their own work with students. I realize that this training or reorientation is a tall order, but there are some ways in which we can make our own task easier. For example, in the December 1978 issue of Today's Education, an interesting brief article by a Title I coordinator in Virginia was included. Let me read you this short passage:

"John went to Vescio's, his favorite Italian restaurant. He ordered lasagna. When the waiter brought it, John was so enraged that he left without leaving a tip. He even forgot his umbrella."

Now you tell me: Why did John go to Vescio's?

Can you tell me why John was angry?

Did John pay for his meal?

Who seated him at the table?

What was the weather that day?

Although not one of these questions is explicitly answered in the passage, you would probably find as we did that most responses will be the same because the restaurant scene and the procedure that one follows when going out to eat are firm in our minds, thus leading us to common inferences. Written language does not always have to specify common familiar details; inferences must be made. However, if we can assist the teachers of English, social studies, and science and make them sensitive to the fact that some students may not have the necessary prior experience to allow these inferences, they can probably have a much smoother time of helping the students construct meaning from a written passage. I am sure that you could all list some other awarenesses that other classroom teachers should gain in order to share in the responsibility of improving reading ability. Buckley further reminds us that,

"Students progress in language by practicing it in ever increasingly complex situations. When the practice is frequent and for a genuine purpose, growth in language will result. On the other hand, growth

does not occur from the study of language. Because language is social, it must be used with other persons. It is not a paper and pencil exercise where the proper nouns are underlined. The confusion of language for use and language for study has produced too many students who can define the eight parts of speech but who, when called upon to describe an event, or debate an issue, are hesitant, clumsy, and unconvincing speakers or writers. In the great majority of reading programs, students spend much more time studying about reading, that is doing worksheet exercises in phonics or structural analysis or the like, than in uninterrupted, sustained reading of quality literature". (Buckley, op. cit., p. 44-45.)

This distinction between language study and language use is one that is an important guideline for us in our planning of proper program emphases.

3. Raise our expectations of students

A third challenge growing out of the second is to remember that what we expect of the student has a clear and research-proven relationship to how much the student ultimately does. I am afraid that we have often given up on, or had low expectations for, many of our students. A Piagetian scholar in Israel by the name of Feuerstein has developed a fascinating new curriculum to help in the remediation of certain cognitive skills which he found certain immigrant Jewish groups to be lacking. For example, he had found that Jewish adolescents immigrating to Israel from Morocco were being tested and classified in unusually high proportions as "mentally retarded." He therefore realized that those students were the victims of their cultural deprivation, which was able to be undone through a series of paper-and-pencil interventions that focussed their attention for some twenty minutes a day for two to three years on such tasks as orientation in space, comparisons, syllogism, perception, understanding

of absurdities, and a number of others; as a result of his work with these students he found an increase of up to forty points on so-called IQ tests for these mis-classified children. The significant difference in this program, however, is that with adolescents it begins re-mediation at the representational level in a Piagetian sense, since that is the developmental level where adolescents are. Most other so-called remedial programs take the student back to the concrete operational stage, at a time when the student is no longer really at that stage of development. This program which I know you will be hearing more about in California in the months ahead is entitled Instrumental Enrichment and I would be glad to share more information about it if you would be interested. My point in mentioning it to you is that with adolescents at least, it is rarely too late to make a difference.

4. Tell what's right with education, too

Finally, we have the fourth challenge of changing from a defensive to a pro-active posture as educators. Earlier I quoted one study in Indiana. There are others. For example, how many people do you think realize that in 1900 only six percent of our students were graduating from high school, while in 1975 it was seventy-four percent? Or, that in 1950 the average twenty-five year-old had completed 9.3 years of schooling while in 1976 it was 12.3 years? Or, that the top ten percent of American students performed better in reading than the similar group from twenty-two other nations? And the list goes on. For too long we have reacted

to criticism with a defensive stance. There is no question that we have improvements that are needed. And we need to continue to concentrate on those. However, at the same time, I would like to challenge everyone of you between now and the end of May 1980 to take one success-story or one teaching practice or one program of which you are particularly proud and tell someone in the public about it--you have plenty of choices for informing. You can try the local newspaper; or you can schedule a session for parents at your local school; or you can send home a truly "upbeat" newsletter; or you can schedule a ten-minute public presentation at a school board meeting which you anticipate will be well-attended. And I am certain that you can think of other avenues beside these.

In a year when the very future of public education in this State is being challenged through the voucher initiatives, we must take our own initiative, and we have to remove ourselves from being mystique-bound as specialists and move toward helping all teachers become teachers of reading and use us to some extent as resources but not as the exclusive remediators. Some other initiatives which you can take, according to Lee Jenkins in the Summer 1979 issue of the California Journal of Teacher Education, are:

1. Insist that children read about something that is substantive, and not do just empty exercises.
2. Invest in some cassette tapes for accountability parents can understand. Instead of sending home only checklists for accountability, send home on cassette (two times a year) three minutes of each child's best reading. The child practices and practices until she/he can read the selection perfectly. Parents can understand this kind of accountability.

3. Publish. Publish the books written by the children at your school. Put two copies in the school library and print 20 copies of exceptionally well done books to distribute to other schools and libraries. (Lee Jenkins, "A Principal's Guide to Improving Reading Teaching," CJTE, Vol. IV, No. 3, 1979, p. 76-82.)

Carr has said that:

"Teachers need the accumulated knowledge of an encyclopedia, the financial skills of a banker, the adaptability of a chameleon, the courage of a persecuted saint, the subtlety of a serpent, the eyes of a hawk, the gentleness of a dove, the patience of Job, the strength of a lion, the heart of a rhinoceros, and the perseverance of the devil." (W.G. Carr, Echo 7, 1969, p. 7.)

I am convinced that you can take each of these challenges and meet them if you can take the time to educate the public about what reading is and is not, educate other teachers about ways to share the reading responsibility, educate ourselves to expect more of students, and educate the public about the tremendous accomplishments about which our public system should be duly proud. Best wishes to you for a successful conference!